DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 028 512 EA 002 109

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Strengthening Citizen Participation: An Analysis of New York City Experiments.

Pub Date 8 Feb 69

Note-14p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Amer. Educ. Res. Assn. (Los Angeles, Calif., Feb. 8, 1969).

EDRS Price MF-$0.25 HC-$0.80

Descriptors-*Citizen Participation, *Decentralization, Interagency Cooperation, *Policy Formation, Public Schools, Race Relations, *School Community Relationship, Social Mobility, *Teacher Associations, Teacher Militancy

Identifiers-New York City

Although New York City has received the bulk of publicity on the decentralization issue because of the bitter conflicts there, the issue exists in other large cities as well. Community members, especially in the ghettos, have become disenchanted with the bureaucratic organization and want to have a voice in policy decisions. Teachers, on the other hand, having acquired a great deal of power through the size of their organizations, feel that decentralization poses a threat to this newly acquired power. The result has been tragic and volatile confrontations between community groups and the teacher's union, especially in the Ocean Hill-Brownsville decentralization struggle. Events which have permeated the New York crisis could cause trouble for other cities if they are not recognized and corrected. Lessons of the crisis are that the civil rights movement and other developments have triggered an irreversible response in the ghettos; (2) since school systems are the prime means through which social mobility can be achieved, they will continue to receive much attention in the nation's urban struggle; (3) there was a lack of communication between the city board of education and the community's fledgling governing board; and (4) there were no attempts to hammer out compromises cooperatively. (HW)

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STRENGTHENING CITIZEN PARTICIPATION:

AN ANALYSIS OF NEW YORK CITY EXPERIMENTS

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EA 002 109

A presentation made during a symposium held on February 8, 1969 at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association in Los Angeles, California

STRENGTHENING CITIZEN PARTICIPATION:

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Some Caveats

In recent months heated controversy over the interrelated issues of decentralization and community control in the New York City school system has attracted national attention. Countless articles and newspaper stories have already been written about the bitter conflict which has tormented the nation's largest city. In this brief presentation I can only explore superficially some very complex issues which are so pivotal to the future of public education in New York City and in other large cities as well. At the outset it is necessary to acknowledge rather candidly the serious limitations which confront anyone who attempts to analyze the still unresolved, ever fluid, and highly volatile and unpredictable New York City situation.

The New York City educational situation, of course, even in more tranquil times, has been rather difficult to describe. The very size and inherent diversity of a system that has some 900 schools, 1,100,000 students, 57,000 teachers, and 3,700 administrators militates against neat generalizations or tidy analyses. The complexity of a school system with a $1.4 billion budget (more than is spent by 26 states to run their entire governmental operation) and more students than all but nine states in the country should require little elaboration. The diversity found in a city as massive and heterogeneous as New York must always be borne in mind. There are few, if any, monolithic power structures to identify as the determinors of policy. Pluralistic decision-making is characteristic of New York City. An analysis of the three most visible and significant efforts to strengthen citizen participation in educational decision-making, for example, reflects New York City's diversity. These three decentralization experiments, namely, Ocean Hill-Brownsville, I.S. 201, and Two Bridges, have had somewhat different histories despite a somewhat common genesis. The Ocean Hill-Brownsville situation, as we all know, has exploded, while the other two situations in recent

months have remained relatively quiescent. Thus even when discussing a specific issue like decentralization, one should exercise the utmost care in articulating judgements that may not be equally applicable throughout an almost indescribably vast and diverse city.

New York City as the Cockpit of Action

With these most significant limitations and the unique complexity of New York City kept firmly in mind, let me be intrepid enough, or perhaps downright foolish enough, to attempt to discuss some of the implications of the New York City experiments in decentralization for the rest of the country. Controversial educational issues in New York, as well as issues in other major public policy realms, appear to generate great interest and to elicit much response throughout the country. Many believe, for example, that the contract breakthrough of New York City's United Federation of Teachers in the very early 1960's was the triggering mechanism that unleashed the burgeoning teacher militancy of recent years. Whether the issue is desegregation, compensatory education, or teacher strikes, what happens in New York City is important nationwide news. In addition to its size and obvious economic and cultural prominence, New York's visibility is doubtless maximized by its being the home base of so many of the country's major communications media. Numerous key outlets of the various news media, papers like the New York Times, and important journals are based in New York. Indeed, some observers from other sections of the country refer somewhat critically to New York's alleged dominance of the communications media as a reflection of the powerful "eastern syndrome" which allegedly characterizes American life. In any event, there can be little question but that an issue in New York as significant as the conflict over school decentralization and community control will reverberate throughout the nation and profoundly effect other cities confronted with similar problems.

The Transcendency of Race in Urban Affairs

Before discussing what other cities might learn from the education conflict in New York City it is important to mention briefly the transcendent importance of the racial issue in America's largest cities. Although the issues in New York may be more complex and dramatic because of the city's size, countless other urban centers are facing analagous problems as their black populations and student enrollments increase. In essence, the problems of the poor and alienated, whose ranks are so inordinately composed of blacks, are similar in substance, if not in scale, in city after city throughout the nation. These problems, particularly as they have reflected the various thrusts of the civil rights movement, are national in scope and significance and predate by years the more recent demands for decentralization and community control of public education in the cities.

It is important, for example, to recognize that the current demands of the black communities for control of their schools have not developed de novo but must be viewed with some historical perspective. The disenchantment of so many blacks with current educational systems is predicated upon years of festering frustration as the promises of equal educational opportunity for their children implicit in the Brown decision of 1954, countless abortive desegregation plans, and innumerable platitudinous speeches by public officials, have remained unfulfilled. Growing numbers of ghettoized blacks are thus no longer committed to reform of the existing educational structure. They are not only questioning, but are actively and vigorously opposing, its very viability and legitimacy.[1]

The bitter disappointment with the failure of efforts that have been made thus far to desegregate schools or to provide adequate compensatory education has precipitated dramatic changes in the educational demands of numerous blacks. In city after city throughout the country there are manifested in the black neighborhoods demands not merely for

administrative decentralization to make large bureaucratic school systems more responsive and accountable, but concomitant demands that the local communities actually determine educational policy. In many cities it is now believed that meaningful reform is impossible to achieve within the existing system and that only community control will provide adequate educational opportunities for black youngsters. Increasingly, efforts to alter existing educational structures are being made by black leaders who are implacably hostile to and antagonistic towards the white school establishment. These leaders derive their support from community groups which, rightly or wrongly, have lost all confidence in the white leadership's desire to educate their children. These community groups and their vocal spokesmen now reject mere palliatives such as administrative reform and demand a fundamental "redistribution of power in the school system through decentralization and increased community control."[2] In New York City this increasingly strident movement to achieve a "redistribution of power" is symbolized by the proposal that was implemented in the experimental decentralized districts that the community elect local boards of education which would have budgetary and personnel decision-making prerogatives. It is the latter issue, of course, that was the immediate cause of the recent conflict.

New York City: Only the First Confrontation in a National Struggle

Some contend that New York is so unique and different from the rest of the country that its conflicts are only a local phenomenon and have little relevance to other cities. These skeptics about the national importance of the current controversy over citizen participation in New York City should be reminded of evidence that indicates that protest strategies used in one city are quickly disseminated and often used in other cities. The school boycotts protesting de facto segregation in 1963 and 1964, for example, quickly spread from city to city as the dynamics of the civil rights movement permeated the country

with the important goal of desegregating urban schools.

Why, it might be asked, has the issue erupted first and so dramatically in New York City, where the school system has at least attempted to project a relatively progressive image in its attempts to mitigate de facto segregation and provide meaningful compensatory education opportunities? I cannot presume to be able to answer this question definitively, but perhaps part of the answer can be derived from what little we know about social revolution, namely, that revolutions are more apt to occur the closer people are to achieving their goals. The nation is in the midst of a racial revolution and the drive for school decentralization and community control of education in the cities cannot be detached from this fact of contemporary American life. In other words, what is now happening in New York is not a local aberration but is symptomatic of a national drive for citizen participation that will not be restricted geographically to a single city or region of the country.

There is more tangible evidence that can be mustered to support the contention that the recent educational conflict in New York cannot be localized, is not atypical, and will be replicated in many other areas. Recently, for example, a group of black educators from five cities developed strong pronouncements espousing community control of schools. Also legislation proposing community control and independent city school districts was introduced last year not only in New York, but in Massachusetts, Michigan and Kentucky as well.[3]

Community-Teacher Organization Confrontations

Perhaps the most important developments to be discussed from the recent Ocean Hill-Brownsville decentralization squabble in New York City relate to the tragic and volatile confrontation that erupted between community groups and the teachers union. This confrontation, which has been exacerbated by racist and anti-Semitic charges and countercharges between the adversaries, is literally threatening to destroy the very political and

social fabric of the nation's most populous city. I have neither the time nor the necessary facts to explore in depth this destructive polarization of a city. However, it must be mentioned in any discussion of the New York City struggle. There would seem to be a substantial danger, moreover, that other communities, if they are not careful and learn from the multitude of mistakes made by all parties involved in the New York confrontation, might face the same kind of destructive community-teacher conflict.[4]

In most of our large cities like New York, as well as in the nation generally, teachers organizations are becoming more militant and powerful at the same time as the demands for decentralization and community control escalate. Thus, like the head-on collision in New York, irresistable forces may meet immovable objects in other communities unless statesmanship is exercised by all parties to preclude replication of the devastating New York impasse. Teacher organizations having grasped power relatively recently are understandably reluctant to jeopardize hard-won benefits and prerogatives. The job-security and vested interests of members are of primary importance to teacher groups which have achieved their political leverage through collective bargaining procedures. Efforts to achieve decentralization and community control often are viewed as threats to the organizational power of teacher groups. After all, it is largely the ability to shut down a school system through a strike supported by an overwhelming percentage of a district's teachers that provides a teachers organization with its political muscle. Decentralization and community control, it is feared by many teacher groups, would fragment their political strength by compelling them to negotiate different contracts with different governing boards. The ultimate strength of any large organization, they contend, is in a membership committed to unified action on issues that effect all members of the group. This teacher unity, buttressed by the sanction of the ultimate strike weopon, will be dissipated, it is feared, if city school districts are "balkanized." Some

leaders of teacher organizations thus see the decentralization issue as a matter of veritable life and death for their groups and professional ideologies.

One observer has analyzed the strong teacher response to decentralization in New York as follows:

> One reason for the high intensity of the emotions on the part of the teachers in the New York battle against community control is that, in effect, decentralization denies all the assumptions about education that have been held for more than a generation. Theories of teacher selection, qualification, tenure, methods, and curriculum-indeed, the entire professional ideology, is being challenged.
>
> This challenge comes just at a time when the long struggle for teacher recognition seemed to be won. Over the last ten years teachers have acquired, through their unions and increasingly militant teacher associations, substantial influence in educational policy making. Now, suddenly they are faced with a threat of the disintegration of the very system they were coming to control.
>
> They will not yield without a bitter fight, for they were only able to achieve their power by taking education out of municipal politics. They see decentralization as a hammer about to smash the protective glass of professional standards which were originally developed as a means of improving the quality of teachers and to allow the system to take in minorities kept out through political interference. Now it is the same "professionalized" system which appears to be functioning to keep other minorities out.[5]

The very sanctity of the basic concepts of job security and seniority is at stake from the perspective of some non-teacher employee groups. As a result, the struggle in New York City has escalated to include other public employee groups which foresee potential threats to their rights, if teacher employment and assignment is determined not by a negotiated central contract but by community groups. In New York, for example, the state AFL-CIO and New York City's powerful Central Labor Council gave strong support to the United Federation of Teachers in the union's struggle to have the teachers opposed by the governing board of Ocean Hill-Brownsville reinstated. The decentralization controversy in New York thus has enveloped organized labor in general and not just the teachers union. Similar developments

are predictable elsewhere, particularly in industrialized states where organized labor is so potent politically. John Doar, the President of the New York City Board of Education, reportedly made the following statement on the seemingly intractable New York City conflict:

> ...Union concepts of security and seniority were formulated in the period of struggle between company and union. Now the struggle is between the Negroes and the unions... It is our position that a basic conflict exists between labor-union concepts and civil-rights concepts. Something has to give...[6]

A.H. Raskin, assistant editor of the editorial page of the New York Times, summarizes cogently the burgeoning conflict between organized public employees and disadvantaged minorities that exists in New York and that has erupted, or will erupt, in many other communities as well:

> What emerges from the name-calling and back-biting and the political posturing on every side of the municipal labor scene is the certainty of still more strife. The city's public service system is a repository of money and power, the two things the ghetto wants most. Payroll costs take nearly $3.5 billion of New York's $6 billion expense budget. But the undereducated, underequipped people of the slums find their access to that pot of gold blocked by a wall of rules built up over the years to shield those already inside the civil service. The point of these rules, of course, is to ban the spoils system and enshrine merit as the sole test in appointments and promotions. To the job-hungry on the outside wanting in, however, the whole qualifications structure is part of a conspiracy by their white overlords to hold them in colonial subjugation and shut them out of either participation or control of the agencies that have most to do with their daily lives. The white civil servant becomes "the enemy," and the better union protectionism makes his job, the more intense the ghetto's resentment.[7]

In a sense the struggle over the schools may be the first stage of a larger struggle concerning citizen involvement in governmental institutions. In a society that is growing more complex most public as well as private agencies have become much larger and con-

comitantly increasingly bureaucratized. Citizens in a purportedly democratic society have a growing sense of anomie and detachment from the governmental institutions that are supposed to respond to their desires and needs. Professional educators like others in public employ, it is charged, have become insulated and isolated from the people they purport to serve. A new reform movement to make big government more responsive to citizens seems to be emerging. The alienation of citizens from their detached and massive governmental structures is exacerbated by racial animosities in the cities. We thus find in New York City and elsewhere that new political alignments are taking place. The "good government" forces that supported the civil service reform movement in the past now often support decentralization as a means of buttressing grass-roots participatory democracy through community control of the schools. This coalition of reformers and community groups which supports decentralization finds itself opposed by powerfully organized and entrenched public employees who see any change in governmental structure as a threat to their job security.[6] In education, as well as in other policy areas, the basic question may well be, who will control governmental institutions, the public or the professional?

Some Possible Insights to Be Derived from the New York City Crisis

If, indeed, the assumption is accepted that other urban school systems also are confronted with a situation in which their communities and professional staffs are headed on a collision course, what lessons can be learned to avert or at least mitigate some of the harmful by-products of the New York decentralization confrontation?

First of all, it is important for educational leaders to recognize that the civil rights movement, the Anti-Poverty Program, the growing foundation and university involvement in city problems, the newly created Urban Coalition, and other developments of recent years have triggered an irreversible response in the urban ghettoes. This response is basically the

desire of the poor and particularly the black poor to participate in decisions effecting their lives. The very perceptible political backlash of recent years will not thwart these demands to influence public policy in pivotal areas like education, welfare, housing, and employment. The ferment in education is a central component of an even larger societal revolution in which rapid change is inevitable. In New York, for example, civil rights leader Milton Galamison just a few years ago was viewed by critics as a militant "outsider" who was arrested several times for precipitating school boycotts and sit-ins. Reverend Galamison was appointed recently to serve on the Board of Education by Mayor Lindsay and is already one of its more vocal and influential members.

School systems, because education is the prime means through which social mobility can be achieved, will continue to be in the eye of the nation's urban hurricane. The bitter conflict over decentralization which permeated New York City, however, need not be replicated in other cities. Philadelphia, Boston, Chicago, Washington, and Detroit are cities which have launched decentralization experiments without the intense furor that engulfed New York. Political and educational leaders simply failed to plan decentralization adequately in New York. Once community expectations had been aroused a more specific plan delineating the responsibilities of the experimental governing boards should have been developed and a timetable for implementation adopted. Many of the inherent suspicions of the black community of the school system's commitment to decentralization and improved education were fortified and aggravated by the vacillation of the city's political and educational leadership.

There was an appalling lack of communication, for example, between the New York City Board of Education and the fledgling governing board of Ocean Hill-Brownsville. There were no general guidelines or procedures to follow. Chaos and confusion not surprisingly ensued. Then, too, there was no basis for day-to-day working relationships between the

central board and its staff and their Ocean Hill-Brownsville counterparts. The responsibilities and prerogatives of the new decentralized board were never delineated explicitly. The unit administrator and the Governing Board could never be certain of their legal authority on personnel and other issues. The 1968 conflict over teacher transfers had been presaged by the dispute in 1967 over whether the central Board of Education or the governing board had the authority to appoint principals in the district. In summary, the present controversy might have been mitigated and perhaps even averted if there had been from the project's infancy clearer demarcations of responsibility between the Board of Education and the governing Board.

There were no attempts to hammer out compromises cooperatively. No efforts were made to involve headquarters staff members from the regular system as the Ocean Hill-Brownsville district came into existence. As a result, New York City's powerful central educational bureaucracy, which was to side with the teachers union in the subsequent showdown, was alienated and suspicious of the decentralization experiment from the outset. The fact that no attempt was made either by the Board of Education or the governing board to link the new district with the established on-going system may have guaranteed that overt conflict would occur. Even a modicum of communication or cooperation might have mitigated the bitter conflict that ultimately engulfed New York City's public school system.

Before closing may I speculate briefly upon one of the more salient implications of the New York City situation for decentralization or for that matter controversial educational experiments of any magnitude in other cities. Some observers contend that meaningful experiments which threaten the status quo are very vulnerable to concentrated and focussed opposition when they occur in only one or two places in a vast enterprise. Critics of the powerful New York City educational bureaucracy would contend, for example, that

the city's school establishment was able to sabotage decentralization because of the piece-meal approach employed. It may be that educational changes of any magnitude will have to be implemented on an all-or-nothing basis in large cities if they are to succeed against the entrenched and influential establishment.[9] This prospect of massive and immediate change, however, in a city the size of New York, for example, must be viewed with apprehension because of the meager planning competence in contemporary education. In smaller, less complex, cities, however, the "blitz" strategy may work if some lessons are learned from the somber mistakes made by so many of the parties in New York.

Footnotes

[1] For an interesting rationale of the need to restructure fundamentally existing educational institutions see Hamilton, Charles V., "Race and Education: A Search for Legitimacy," in Harvard Educational Review, Fall, 1968.

[2] Gittell, Marilyn, "Urban School Reform in the 1970's," Education and Urban Society, Vol. 1, Number 1, November, 1968, p. 11. In this article, Professor Gittell distinguishes between two kinds of urban educational reform. One kind of reform, more traditional in nature, is found in a city like Philadelphia where there is a strong movement for change within the system being led by the Superintendent of Schools and the president of the board of education. The second type of reform, which is far more prevalent, emanares from non-school leaders who struggle for change from the grass-roots level with their community supporters.

[3] Ibid., p. 12.

[4] It should be noted that a few other cities, notably Washington, D.C., that are also conducting decentralization experiments have not had bitter conflict between advocates of community control and organizations representing teachers. In Washington, for example, where the teaching staff is 80% Negro, the teachers union has supported decentralization experiments.

[5] Roberts, Wallace, "The Battle for Urban Schools," Saturday Review, November 16, 1968, p. 117.

[6] Raskin, A.H., "Why New York Is 'Strike City'", The New York Times Magazine, December 22, 1968.

[7] Ibid., p. 29.

[8] See Zeluck, Stephen, "The UFT Strike" Will It Destroy the AFT?," Phi Delta Kappan, January, 1969, for one teacher union leader's criticism of the UFT strategy in New York City. Mr. Zeluck deplores the union-community cleavage and the resulting destruction of the UFT's "widely recognized patina of progressiveness." Teacher union and black community symbiosis, he maintains, is essential for the reform of urban education and the AFT's very survival is predicated upon "a bold and comprehensive alliance with the civil rights movement."

[9] For interesting analyses of the entrenched power of the school bureaucracy in New York City see Gittell, Marilyn, Participants and Participation: A Study of School Policy in New York City, Center for Urban Education, 1967, and Rogers, David, 110 Livingston Street, Random House, 1968.